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# Merrillville's 1st charter builds its 'power' base at early registration



Nikisha Scott and her daughter Anonda-Marie Hemphill, 5, attend the early bird registration for the Heritage Institute for Arts and Technology at Lake County Public Library Saturday, Dec. 19, 2015. (Suzanne Tennant / Post-Tribune)

By **Karen Caffarini**  
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**V**anessa Reese was among the first people to submit an application for Merrillville's first charter school, even though there's a possibility her child will only be able to attend the school for one year.

"It offers a different style of learning," Reese, a [Crown Point](#) resident, said of the Heritage Institute of Arts & Technology during an early bird registration at the main branch of the Lake County Public Library in Merrillville.

Reese said her child will be entering the fourth grade in August 2016, when the school plans to open on a limited basis for students in kindergarten through fourth grade only.

HIAT officials said they hope to add another grade level each year for several years up to eighth grade.

"That's my hope, too," Reese said.

Reese was among several parents who came to the library Saturday to learn more about the charter school that just recently won state approval and to fill out an application for their child or children.

"This will be such a powerful school. It will have such an impact," Dr. Darlene Henderson, president and chief executive officer of the charter school, told the parents and children.

She said she's excited about the number of parents who came out to the first early bird registration and thankful for the continuous support she's received from the school's advisory board members and other proponents since she started the process to open the charter school in 2005.

Henderson's school has had its opponents and setbacks in those 10 years, including having her first proposed site for the school rejected by the Merrillville Town Council, which said it wasn't an appropriate location for a school. Henderson said two sites now being considered are both already zoned for education purposes.

The charter school received strong opposition from administrators and teachers at the Merrillville Community School Corp., who told staff members for the Indiana Charter School Board in a public hearing that the public school system already offers students the arts and technology that HIAT is proposing and that the school corporation has a proven record of success, where HIAT doesn't, and charter schools take funding away from public schools.

And then there was the state charter school board, which raised several questions about HIAT last spring, causing Henderson to withdraw her application at the time.

James Betley, executive director of the Indiana Charter School Board staff, said many of those questions have since been answered, resulting in the school's approval in November. However, he added HIAT must still meet certain benchmarks to open in August, including sufficient enrollment, finances and building permits.

Henderson is optimistic.

"We're putting forward the effort to get this moving. We will definitely open in August," she said.

Two more early bird registrations -- in February and April 2016 -- and a formal registration in June 2016 are planned. Parents can also sign up online at <http://www.the-hiat.org/>.

School will be in session from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., with the school year lasting from Aug. 17, 2016, to June 9,

2017.

According to a flier handed out to parents, options are being researched for transportation and students will wear uniforms.

The flier listed the planned location for the school at 8101 Polo Club in Merrillville, but Henderson said they're also looking at possibly locating inside the Ivy Tech building at the Ameriplex complex in Merrillville.

The location is one of several questions Gail Lewis, of Merrillville, wants answered before she decides whether she'll commit to the new charter school or leave her daughter Dy'mond Lewis in the Merrillville public school where she said Dy'mond is now earning straight A's.

Lewis prefers the Ivy Tech site, which she said has ample parking and is already set up as a school.

The Merrillville woman praised Henderson, who she called a fighter, and said the credentials of the staff are strong

Still, she has concerns.

"I don't want her to regress," she said of her 8-year-old daughter.

"I still have several months to ponder on this," Lewis said.

*Karen Caffarini is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.*

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